

# Better than Paint

Pigmented lacquer is smoother, brighter, and more durable for fine cabinetry

BY SEAN CLARKE



**Right at home.** You should design a built-in or entertainment center to match the design of the room, and a paint company can tint your lacquer to match, too.

Whether in modern or traditional interiors, bookcases, built-ins, and cabinets sparkle when finished in a crisp, classic white. For maximum impact, this finish requires a very even application and a smooth finish, so it is typically sprayed on. But don't despair if you aren't set up to spray: I will show you how to get an off-the-gun-looking finish just by brushing and wiping. It will take longer than spraying, but the quality of this finish is well worth the wait.

While I could reach for oil-based or latex paint, I find that pigmented lacquer provides a superior look in terms of evenness and lack of residual brush marks. I prefer acrylic lacquers over nitrocellulose



ones because they are non-yellowing and retain brilliance better. I'm going to use a pre-catalyzed version here, which has better durability than a non-catalyzed lacquer and is easier to apply than a post-catalyzed lacquer. You can buy this type of lacquer from Sherwin Williams or M.L. Campbell paint stores and, if you like, they can tint it to match an existing color in your house.

### A flawless finish needs perfect prep work

The best woods for painting are close-pored, such as poplar, maple, pine, or birch plywood. The high-solids primer that I'll use can fill medium-pore woods, but if you find yourself having to paint an open-pored wood such as oak it would be best to apply an oil-based grain filler first.

I begin to prep the surfaces by filling any imperfections with water- or solvent-based, natural-colored wood filler. Using a utility blade or flat spatula, I lay the wood filler into any indentations, leaving the filler slightly proud of the surface. For minor indentations (less than 1/16 in. deep and 3/16 in. wide), let the filler dry for one or two hours. Larger fills will require more drying time. Next, I sand the whole surface up to P180- or P220-grit. Wrap the sandpaper around a sanding block for a smooth, even surface. The block also ensures that the filled areas end up even with their surroundings.

Since this project is made from pine, I next apply a 2-lb. cut of shellac as a sealer on any knots or sap pockets. Without it, these areas can emit resin that eventually leaches through the finish. I apply a generous coat of dewaxed shellac to any knots, spreading it away from the center of each knot to blend into the unsealed surfaces. Let the shellac dry for about four hours, or until it is not tacky to the touch, then light-

## PREP THE SURFACE

A painted finish is far less forgiving of any surface defects than a clear finish is, so deal with these first.

**Fill dents and holes.** Clarke uses a knife blade to press wood filler into a knothole.



## TIP

### WHY IS THIS CAN UPSIDE-DOWN?

The manufacturer of Plastic Wood intentionally inverts the label to encourage people to store the can lid-side-down. This old finisher's trick keeps air from leaking in, and works well for any finish that tends to gel or harden in the can.



**Sand it flush.** Use P150-grit paper wrapped around a cork-faced block or a sanding sponge to level the filled area.



**Seal with shellac.** To prevent resin from staining the finish in the future, seal all knots and sap pockets in pine with dewaxed shellac.

## SOURCES OF SUPPLY

### MOP BRUSHES

Davis International Group  
mylands.com



## PRIME FIRST

A primer formulated for lacquer creates a flat, uniform-colored surface for the topcoat.

### PRIMER RECIPE

60% Primer, 40% Thinner

**Thinned for brushing.** To make it easier to brush, Clarke thins the primer with a lacquer thinner.



**Best technique for flat areas: Unload, then spread.** Load the brush and then lay down a thick strip of finish away from the edges (left). Then come back and spread the finish out on both sides of the strip (center). After reloading the brush, land it an inch or two from the wet area (right). Now it, too, can be spread out on both sides and will not create a ridge of excess finish.



**Next coat.** After the first coat is dry, apply the second coat of primer with the same technique, but perpendicular to the first to reduce the buildup of brush marks.

ly dull the shellac with a purple abrasive pad, being careful not to cut through it.

### Primer creates a smooth foundation

White lacquer primer is one of the big secrets. It builds a film that overcomes any imperfections too small to fill and it sands easily, leaving a flat, seamless surface devoid of grain texture, critical for a flawless finish. I work in a large, well-ventilated area; otherwise, I'd use a respirator.

I reduce the primer approximately 40% with the manufacturer's recommended solvent. This is slightly thinner than for spraying but it makes the primer more workable

and forgiving for a hand application. I prefer a large lacquer mop brush (see sources of supply, p. 59) because of the amount of finish that it can carry, but a quality 2-in. natural-bristle flat brush is also a good choice. If possible, work on a horizontal surface, as this greatly reduces the chance of runs. Tip cabinets onto their sides and let one side dry before turning it over.

**Brushing tips for primer and lacquer**—Both the primer and topcoat are applied in the same way. I apply the first coat with the grain, starting a few inches from an edge and applying the finish about half the length of a normal brush stroke. Then I go back and forth to spread it out on each side of the initial brush stroke. After recharging the brush, I land it about an inch or two away from the wet area, ensuring even coverage without a ridge of surplus finish.

On narrow moldings or details, I use a smaller #6 or #8 lacquer mop or a 1-in.

natural-bristle flat brush. I let this whole first coat dry at least one to two hours, depending on temperature and humidity, and then evaluate the surface. Fill any imperfections that may have been missed in the initial filling; let the filler dry one to two hours (or longer for larger areas), and then block-sand the filled spots.

If the surface is fairly smooth (and didn't need more filling), you can skip sanding as long as you apply the next coat within 60 to 90 minutes. If you wait longer, or the surface is rough, sand it with P220-grit paper to smooth the surface and to create a mechanical bond with the next coat.

To apply the second primer coat, I work perpendicular to the grain, using the same technique. By applying coats alternately with and across the grain, you minimize a buildup of brush lines. If you are brushing a confined area, apply all the coats in the longer of the two directions. I allow this coat to dry for a minimum of two to four hours, depending on temperature and humidity, but overnight is fine too.

I repeat the horizontal application for the third primer coat, let that dry for two to four hours, and then block-sand all the primed surfaces with P220-grit sandpaper. I use a vacuum with a brush attachment to carefully remove all the sanding dust. Wipe your hand across the surface. If it comes up white, gently use a tack cloth to remove any remaining dust.

### Apply topcoats until you get the desired look

It's time to apply the tinted lacquer topcoats. Start by thinning the lacquer by approximately 30% with the manufacturer's recommended solvent and then add a further 10% in retarder. This gives the lacquer time to flow out before drying, minimizing brush marks. I apply the first coat across the grain, as described above, and let it dry for a minimum of two to four hours. Using P220-grit sandpaper and a block, I lightly sand this coat to remove any surface debris and brush marks, and then vacuum away the dust. I apply a second coat of lacquer with the grain, and then allow the workpiece to dry overnight.

**Stop here?** The next day I assess the workpiece. As long as there is no streaking, and if you like a little grain pattern showing, then you can stop here. If desired, you can rub the surface with 0000 steel wool wrapped around a cork block



## REMOVE ANY FLAWS

Sand the surface and deal with any remaining problems before applying a third coat of primer.

**Sand each coat.** Lacquer primer is designed to be easily sanded. Wrap P220-grit paper around a block for flat areas, and hold it in your fingers for moldings.



**Remove all dust.** After vacuuming the surface, lightly wipe it with a tack cloth to remove any remaining residue.



**More flaws show up.** The uniform appearance of the primer will probably reveal surface defects that were camouflaged by the natural wood. Fill and smooth them.



**Deal with drips.** If you can't catch a drip or run immediately, don't wipe the sticky surface. Let it dry, then shave it flush with a sharp knife. Clarke uses a utility blade.

## BRUSH ON THE TOP COATS

Like the primer, the lacquer topcoat is thinned and applied in multiple coats.

### BRUSHING RECIPE

60% lacquer, 30% thinner, 10% retarder

**Doctor it for brushing.** Thin the topcoat to make it easier to apply and add retarder to leave fewer brush marks.



**Brush in sequence.** When finishing complicated surfaces, do the large surfaces first with a big brush, then cover molding and trim with a smaller one.



**Sand between coats.** Sanding not only removes dust nibs and brush marks, but it also creates a mechanical bond between layers of finish.



**Work horizontally.** On large and small pieces, when possible, work on a horizontal surface to reduce the risk of runs.

and then apply wax, to both level the surface and then even out the sheen.

### Brush two more coats and then pad on a topcoat for a flawless finish

Even if you aren't set up to spray, you can still achieve the formal look of a factory finish; it just takes a little longer. Lightly block-sand all the surfaces with P220-grit sandpaper to remove dust nibs and brush marks. Then rub all the surfaces with a maroon abrasive pad, dulling down the finish to make really sure that a mechanical bond can be achieved with the next coat. Follow up by wiping all surfaces with a tack rag to remove any fine sanding debris.

I apply two more coats in the same manner as the first two, sanding after each and allowing for an overnight drying period.

To approach the smoothness achieved by spraying, pad on a final application of lacquer. To form the pad, I cut a cotton bed sheet roughly 8 in. square, removing any hems. I then cut a piece of cotton wadding (available at fabric stores) about 6 in. square and fold it into a wad roughly 2 in. wide and 3 in. long, with a point at one end.

I further thin the topcoat by 10%, and then add it directly to the core of the pad. After squeezing out the excess, I place it in the center of the sheet, bring each corner of the sheet in to the center, twist the corners into a grip for the pad, and make sure that the polishing side of the pad is tight and free of creases or wrinkles.

I start the process perpendicular to the grain, beginning at the far edge, working the pad left to right and slowly moving toward me. When you begin to feel some resistance, it's time to charge the pad with more lacquer. Open the pad and add lacquer to the inner face of the wadding, let it absorb, re-wrap the pad tightly, and gently squeeze the pad to remove any excess material.

When working in an area where the light source is fluorescent tubes, place the workpiece in a position so that your strokes are perpendicular to the light source for a better surface reading.

Working a small area such as the side of a cabinet, I cover the whole surface two or three times, let it dry for about 10 minutes, and then repeat the process with the grain. I pad in alternating directions up to four times, with a 10-minute drying break after each application, until I am satisfied with the build and evenness of the surface.

## CHOOSE YOUR FINAL SHEEN

As with clear coats, you have a choice of final sheen. You can use steel wool and wax for a low-luster look, or pad on the last coat for a high gloss.

### LOW LUSTER

**Steel wool and wax.** Unwrap a pad of 0000 steel wool and fold it around a sanding block. Rub the surface in one direction to smooth and dull the surface (right). Wipe on and buff off a coat of paste wax (far right) for an even sheen and a pleasing feel.



### HIGH GLOSS

**Pad on a final coat.** Make a pad with cotton cloth and cotton wadding. To get an even flow of finish, always add the finish directly to the core (right) and not to the outside of the pad. Pad on a last coat (far right), wiping lightly to keep the coat very thin.



#### PADDING RECIPE

50% lacquer, 40% thinner, 10% retarder

In tight corners, moldings, and narrow surface areas, you can try using a smaller pad. Or you can allow the larger surface areas to cure overnight, and then tape them off with low-tack blue tape before padding the adjoining smaller areas.

Let the finish cure for two or three days before moving it into the house. This will allow it to off-gas in the workshop and avoid the risk of heavy object imprinting into the finish while it is still soft. □

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**Isolate the trim.** If you can't pad the whole surface at once cleanly, let the large areas dry overnight, then mask off areas adjacent to the trim, and work on it with a smaller pad.